

The Story of Stuff

This lesson is based on a 20-minute video created by Annie Leonard that explains where our stuff comes from and the problems faced by our stuff-driven society. You can find it [here on the Story of Stuff website](#). I highly recommend that you preview the entire video yourself before showing it to your class.



It's most appropriate for 5th grade and up. Even though it's only 20 minutes long, this video will take several class periods to watch and discuss. Below are suggested activities and discussion questions.

Prior Viewing Questions and Activities

1. Hold up a pencil and ask students to think about where it comes from and how it's made. What exactly was involved in creating the pencil? (Cutting the trees, shipping them to the factory, forming them, mining the graphite, extracting or manufacturing rubber, etc.) If time allows, show the YouTube video [How Pencils are Made](#). This video leaves out the steps that occurred before the materials arrived at the factory, but it's still helpful.
2. Ask students to jot down the name of something they enjoy using (phone, game, etc). Ask them to discuss with a partner how they think that item was manufactured and what steps were involved in bringing it to market.
3. Discuss the difference between a government and a corporation. Have students give examples of each. Discuss the purpose of a government versus a corporation, how the leaders of each are selected, and other relevant information.

During the Video





Stop the video periodically and discuss each step in the Story of Stuff. Have students complete the System of Stuff chart as you work through the video. This chart asks students to provide definitions and examples of each step in the process. It also asks them to identify the problems with each step in the creation of our stuff. Take time to discuss each step fully before moving to the next step.

Follow-up Questions

1. Why does the speaker refer to this system as a system in crisis?
2. Why isn't recycling enough to solve our environmental problems?
3. What is planned obsolescence? Define and give an example.
4. What is perceived obsolescence? Define and give an example.
5. Why has our nation's happiness level decreased even though we have more stuff than ever?
6. Explain the "work - watch - spend" treadmill?
7. What does "sustainable" mean in terms of our ways of life, economic systems, and our impact on the environment?
8. What can the government do to fix this system?
9. What can corporations do to fix this system?
10. What can we do to fix this system?
11. Is this video an example of propaganda? Why or why not? How could you verify the accuracy of the information in this video?

The System of Stuff

Name _____

The Process	Definitions and Examples	Problems
Extraction 		
Production 		
Distribution 		
Consumption 		
Disposal		